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Agricultural Development as an Interfaith Bridge in Morocco

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JEWISH HISTORY IN MOROCCO

As the Jewish Virtual Library (2021) indicates about Morocco, Jewish and Arab history has long been tightly connected in Morocco, evidenced by Hebrew inscriptions on tombstones in the Roman ruins at Volubilis. Several Moroccan Amazigh tribes were converted to Judaism, and Jewish people fled to Morocco after the first wave of persecution and expulsion from Spain; this occurred before the Muslim conquest of the Maghreb. During the period that followed, the Jewish population in Morocco dispersed into the cities, where they enriched the economy.

In the new millennium, important centers of Jewish learning emerged in Ceuta, Fes, the Atlas region, and Sijilmasa, near Tafilalet. For this reason, the great Jewish philosopher, scholar, and writer Maimonides (Rabbi Moses ben Maimon) settled for a time in Morocco after fleeing persecution in Spain.

This is not to say that the Jewish people of Morocco were always welcomed nor that they did not experience discrimination. Periods of intolerance and incidents of violence toward them are woven into the nation's history. Religious doctrine turned against non-Muslims for a while. At some point in history, Jewish people were prohibited from living in Marrakech; later, they were subjected to forced conversions, even massacred. In response, many migrated back to Spain, returning to Morocco only under more favorable conditions from more tolerant sovereigns. Eventually, those living in the cities of Fes and Meknes were kept in segregated quarters, or *mellahs*. Tens of thousands took refuge in Morocco during the second Spanish Inquisition, and although they were not entirely well received, the population grew and thrived over the next several hundred years, strengthening their position through a variety of professions.

Today, the remaining synagogues and cemeteries unfold the story of a rich culture and strong faith. Historical records show the vital role Jewish merchants held in the maritime trade at the ports of Mogador (Essaouira) and in other cities along the Atlantic coast. The preserved tombs of Jewish saints—or *tsaddiks*—testify to their place in Moroccan history and culture and also speak to the fact that Morocco is a global center of Jewish mysticism, tradition, and knowledge.

MOROCCO AS A MODEL OF COEXISTENCE

Despite historic tensions between Muslim and Jewish people, Morocco is a model of coexistence in the Arab world between the two religious groups. King Hassan II introduced legislation to protect the country's

Already, some seventy thousand Israelis visit Morocco yearly, but the normalization of diplomatic relations between Israel and Morocco that resumed in December 2020 is serving to vastly increase that pre-pandemic level of socio-economic benefit and good will. Undoubtedly, many Jewish Moroccans will return from Israel to visit their home and the land of their ancestors, particularly with the opening of liaison offices and availability of direct flights (Kasraoui 2020).

For the first time in any Arab country, Moroccan Jewish history and culture has been incorporated into the primary school curriculum. In addition, Jewish and Muslim students at Musa Ibn Maimon High School in Casablanca celebrate holidays from both religions and learn both Hebrew and Arabic, as the Jewish Virtual Library indicates on its website. These events reflect the integration of the faiths and cultures and the significance of their shared history.

There are lesson plans currently being developed highlighting the range of areas of Moroccan Jewish life that intersect with Moroccan heritage, done in collaboration with the Ministry of Education in order for it to be a standard part of the public education curriculum.

WHY PRESERVE JEWISH HISTORIC CEMETERIES?

There is an 800-year-old cemetery in Tighedouine in the Al Haouz province. It holds the history of a small community that was the central Jewish population in that area at the time. When a European company wanted to purchase and develop the land, a local Amazigh woman protested and saved it from destruction (Elmaleh 2009, 0:29). What remains reminds us not only of that former population but also of the coexistence of Jewish and Amazigh people who enjoyed the fruits of the surrounding farms and olive trees.

King Mohamed VI has demonstrated a strong commitment to restoring these cemeteries and preserving this heritage by initiating the House of Life project. The initial survey of their status at the project's inception showed that while they were in poor condition, there were Muslim neighbors who continued to care for them sometimes even 70 years after Jewish people had left the surrounding community (Gold 2020). These custodians take great pride in their stewardship as a moral act in line with their own religious beliefs to not only guard the graves of Moroccan citizens but also of revered saints. This becomes then not only an act of moral obligation but a means of distributing redevelopment money and of serving as a conduit for tourism spending as those from the diaspora return to visit the sites.

back into the community, in an effort to preserve the past's symbols while furthering human development initiatives.

A coalition between the Moroccan Jewish community and HAF works with the land surrounding historic Jewish burial grounds, planting fruit and nut trees and medicinal plant seeds in nurseries until the saplings are mature enough to be transported to other locations. These saplings are provided to local farming families or educational centers for transplanting through partnerships with USAID Farmer to Farmer and Ecosia.

Fruit tree farming represents one solution farming families believe could end the cycle of rural poverty, which persists due to the harvest's uncertainty and the oversaturation of barley and corn (Moroccan farming staples) in the agricultural market. But with more diversified crops, the concentration of staples decreases, and the chance for greater financial return among fruit producers becomes possible.

HAF currently supports 14 nurseries throughout the kingdom of Morocco, providing approximately 1,000,000 saplings per year for purchase at highly subsidized rates. This includes almond, Argan, avocado, carob, cherry, date, fig, jujuba, lemon, olive, pomegranate, prickly pear, quince, and walnut plants. In addition, the processing of products as oils and extracts further diversifies markets, reduces overall competition, and improves livelihoods. Planting nurseries beside the Jewish cemeteries in Morocco opens a pathway to greater levels of food, income, employment, justice, security, biodiversity, multiculturalism, capacities, and dream-building.

This stipulates that the resting place of Morocco's Jewish ancestors is also the birthplace of fruits and nuts, products that sustain the life of the community; in a way, these ancient ancestors are still supporting their local society.

AKRICH: THE FIRST SITE

When HAF met with members of the local organizations as part of a development approach prioritizing local voices and local needs, an important initiative was building tree nurseries. The first nursery began in Akrich, in the Al Haouz province, just an hour south of Marrakesh. The village is home to the 700-year-old tomb of Rabbi Raphael HaCohen, a revered saint who came to the nearby village of Achbarou to teach and heal.

The story goes that, hundreds of years ago, a Jewish man was traveling in the area on a mule. From a distance, he saw that a fire was burning near the site of the Rabbi's tomb. Frightened, he told the villagers, who

nursery project to a nationwide scale. In 2021, U.S. Consul General Lawrence Randolph also visited the nursery along with members of the Muslim and Jewish communities for interfaith activities as part of USAID's Religious and Ethnic Minorities Activities (REMA aka Dakira) including a symbolic candle lighting and shared meal (Stoiber 2021). At that event, the local people shared their individual stories in what became apparent as their understanding of their shared common identity.

SCALING UP

The Akrich nursery was the first of a pilot project: the House of Life Initiative. House of Life, or *bet hayyim*, refers to the eternal resting place or cemetery. According to Jewish tradition, a cemetery can be more sacred than a synagogue, and so the care of the cemeteries is a very important social and religious responsibility.

The nurseries encourage preservation of historic Jewish sites near where they are built. They employ local people, who are therefore eligible to receive health care and social security coverage. Both of these are otherwise difficult to access, especially in informal work, which represents nearly 60 percent of waged workers in Morocco (Abdel Samad 2016, 28). The nurseries have been the setting of interfaith dialogue and community actions within society.

The project is driven by support for multicultural development at the national level. The idea is that the project would have a three-fold effect: it would (1) encourage dialogue and partnership between the Jewish community and the Muslim community and the sharing of their collective knowledge and cultural memories that (2) help to alleviate rural poverty in the area and improve local livelihoods. And (3), planting trees in the area reduces desertification, which has made the land difficult and, in some places, unsuitable for farming.

After Akrich's success, HAF began to build more nurseries as pilots before scaling up to a national level. In 2019, at the request of His Majesty King Mohammed VI of Morocco, the government funded a second community tree nursery. This nursery site is located in Ouarzazate; it is near Rabbi David Ou-Mouche's tomb, its white façades and lush plants set against the surrounding land's earthy tones (Pantelik). There, 90,000 seeds have been grown, producing saplings that have been planted with thousands of local farming families and public schools.

Amid the "dusty foothills of the Moroccan Atlas Mountains," student-intern Nicolas Pantelick describes his first encounter with the simple beauty of the shared site: "Just after midday, I reached the millennia-old

has dwindled to fewer than 3,000. Those who can still recall the time of mutual understanding and cohabitation must participate in development initiatives now before it is too late. Today's youth have rarely had the opportunity to sincerely consider this indelible part of the nation's past and character, and how that past could inform its present and its future. The nonprofit associations involved are dedicated to promoting and preserving Moroccan Jewish heritage, to strengthening society's plural identity, and to furthering sustainable development in Morocco. Cultural and site preservation, multicultural dialogue, and knowledge-building by these associations is harnessing the exceptional history of the Moroccan people and using it for human development initiatives.

Organic fruit tree nurseries benefiting Moroccan farming families, built on land lent in-kind by the Moroccan Jewish community, next to Jewish cemeteries and saints' tombs, symbolize a powerful and essential national initiative. Since Morocco shares all of the biozones represented in the MENA region, these initiatives have implications reaching beyond Morocco where there is diversity of identities and environmental viability.

NOTE

1. Author Y. Ben-Meir currently serves as President of the High Atlas Foundation, referenced in this article.

RECOMMENDED READINGS

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